



Australian Government

**Department of Climate Change, Energy,
the Environment and Water**

Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests

Communique #1, June 2023

Communique of the 20th Committee meeting 23–25 May 2023, Perth

On 23–25 May 2023, the committee met on the lands of the Whadjuk Noongar people in Joondalup, Perth, WA, (meeting #20) and was hosted by the Western Australia Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER). The meeting commenced with an on-Country visit to Lake Joondalup with Noongar Elder Nick Abraham delivering a smoking ceremony and Welcome to Country. The historical learnings and sharing of a creation story reinforced the importance of the committee’s work in pursuing water reform.

Members engaged with DWER and the Aboriginal Water and Environmental Advisory Group (AWEAG) to identify opportunities to streamline the national water reform agenda and enhance bicultural water planning. The uniqueness of Western Australia’s water management needs (including the vast quantities of groundwater) was acknowledged as adding complexity to the national agenda. Ms Michelle Andrews, AWEAG Co-chair and DWER Director General, pledged to foster ongoing relationships and knowledge exchange with the committee.

Representatives from Commonwealth (officials from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the department)), and state and territory jurisdictions, also shared their strategies for advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ inclusion in water policies, access and ownership of water, and involvement in decision-making. There was a general consensus amongst meeting attendees around the significant challenges posed by the disparities between Western water management and Indigenous ecologies. It was acknowledged that the current momentum in advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights provides an opportunity to significantly improve existing water policies and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The committee agreed to hold regular meetings with senior government officials from state and territory water agencies to offer feedback on incorporating cultural values and commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in water policies. This approach will include conveying to key decision-makers the interconnectedness of water, land, and communities, and seeking to ensure future policies and legislation provides clear direction in relation to the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water interests. The committee see it as a priority to futureproof national water reform to ensure that the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ rights and interests is everlasting.

The department provided an update on upcoming consultation processes on the Murray–Darling Basin Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program and undertook to work closely with the committee throughout the consultation period and during the development of a national and enduring mechanism to hold water entitlements.

The committee also held a productive dialogue with the National Water Grid Authority’s CEO, Ms Ruth Wall, about the commitment to invest in water infrastructure for the benefit of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A discussion was also held with the CEO of

Watertrust Australia, Mr Nick Austin, to identify Watertrust Australia's upcoming projects and opportunities to collaborate with the committee. While progress has been made in the water infrastructure space, the committee stressed the need to improve ongoing support in remote communities (i.e., towards the maintenance of remote water infrastructure).

To guide the committee's efforts, three workstreams were established to allow the work of the committee to be shared across its members. The streams include national water reform; Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program and national water holding arrangements; and governance and structure of the committee.

Next meeting

The next meeting of the committee has been scheduled for 9–10 August 2023 in Cairns, Queensland.

Current committee membership

Mr Grant Rigney (Co-Chair)

Mr Rene Woods (Co-Chair)

Dr Rohan Henry (Co-Deputy Chair)

Dr Virginia Marshall (Co-Deputy Chair)

Ms Chontarle Bellottie

Mrs Cheryl Buchanan

Mr Ned David

Dr Phil Duncan

Mr John Locke

Ms Darlene Mansell

Assoc Prof Bradley Moggridge

Dr Anne Poelina.

To contact the committee, please email the Secretariat at CAWI@dcceew.gov.au.